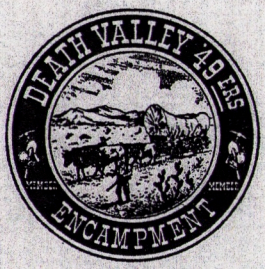
Old Stovepipe Wells



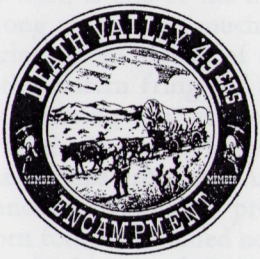
By L. BURR BELDEN

KEEPSAKE NO. 8

Published for the Dedication of

OLD STOVEPIPE WELLS MONUMENT
DEATH VALLEY '49ers ENCAMPMENT
DEATH VALLEY, CALIFORNIA
NOVEMBER 10, 1968

Old Stovepipe Wells



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OLD STOVEPIPE WELLS

The Death Valley National Monument is noted, among other distinctions, for its fantastic gamut of place names which have been derived both from natural features and by historical happenings of unusual sort. Thus, we have Dante's View, Badwater, the Devil's Golf Course, Devil's Cornfield, Dead Man Pass, Lemonade Spring, and Stovepipe Wells to name a few.

Stovepipe Wells, or Old Stovepipe as it is now called to distinguish it from the modern resort of Stove Pipe Wells Village some six miles west, is one of the most famous waterholes in the 100-mile long arid valley, much of which is below sea level. In the centuries before arrival of the lost Argonauts in 1849, this oasis, at the eastern fringe of the vast mid-valley sand dunes, was a key watering spot at the junction of cross-valley trade trails used by the Panamint branch of the Shoshone and neighboring Indian groups from the Amargosa Desert to the east. From the rancheria adjoining present day Furnace Creek Ranch, a well-worn footpath headed north to a ceremonial dance ground at the head of Mustard Canyon, then continued north to Old Stovepipe where it was joined by a second trail that came from the east over Daylight Pass. The trail then continued north to beyond the sand dunes then bore west to ascend Cottonwood Canyon and eventually reach the Racetrack or wind on farther to such places as Jackass Spring and eventually Owens Valley. It was about 20 miles from the Furnace Creek rancheria to Old Stovepipe—a waterless journada—and much farther yet to the next water for the unmounted aborigines. Old Stovepipe was a halt of prime importance.

Important as was Old Stovepipe in pre-caucasian history, this chapter might well have been lost but for two devoted employes of the National Park Service, who in the early days of the monument took time to interview older members of the Panamint Indian band who still recalled stories told by their own fathers of the years before the white man, the burro and

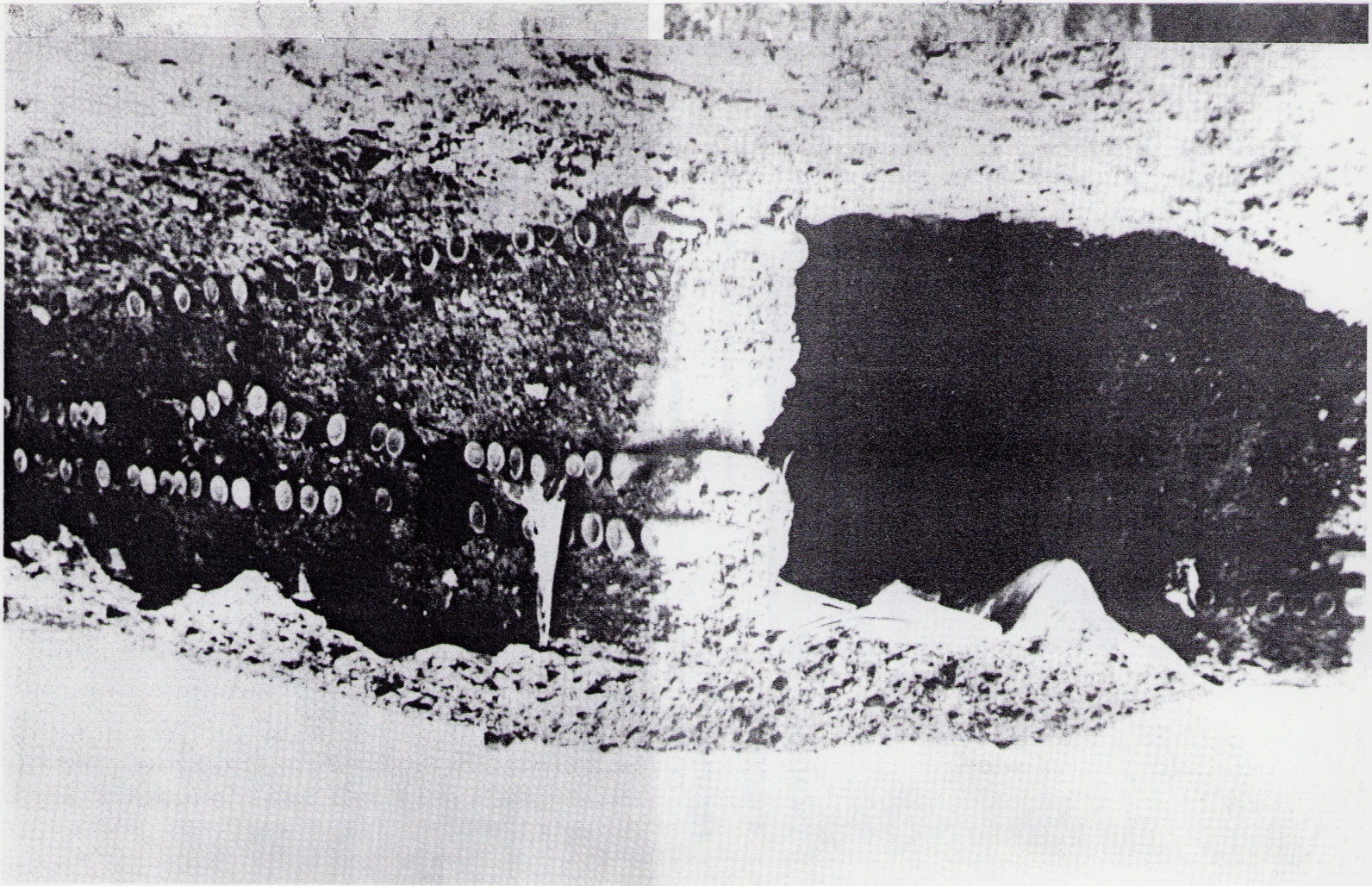
the horse. The park service employes were W. R. Oakes and Mathew H. "Matt" Ryan. Oakes, who had herded cattle in the area in pre-monument days, was in charge of a crew building a road from Old Harmony Borax Works up Mustard Canyon to the highway near the Park Village turnoff. One afternoon, when nearly to the canyon head, he noted the patriarch of the Indian rancheria coming at his customary jog. Shoshone Johnnie hailed Oakes, came nearer, and grapsed the ranger's arm. The old Indian appeared agitated and kept repeating, "Not build road here." Then came the explanation, "Indian's Gods talk here."

Shoshone Johnnie led Oakes a few feet south where he pointed out a compacted oval that had been worn down in ceremonial dances, several rock pulpits or altars, the trails going both north and south, and then directed the ranger's attention to the mustard-colored earth of the canyon itself which Indian legend says was caused by a large bird which had disobeyed the Gods, been set afire, and fallen to discolor the earth as a warning to future sinners.

That afternoon Oakes related his conversation to T. R. Goodwin, then assistant superintendent of the monument. The road was rerouted and the ceremonial site preserved.

Oakes was superintendent of the Tonto National Monument in 1959 when interviewed by this author; he lifted an important corner of the veil that has shrouded the acts and beliefs of the Shoshone.

Matthew H. "Matt" Ryan offers corroboration of the importance of Old Stovepipe in the Indian period. When "Matt", who is now superintendent of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, was ranger at Emigrant Station some 25 years ago he talked frequently with "Bev" Hunter about pre-monument years in Death Valley. "Bev" related how Johnny Hunter, an Indian who lived in Cottonwood Canyon told of the Indian trail from Old Stovepipe into the Cottonwoods.



Program

Dedication
of
Old Stovepipe Wells Monument

(REGISTERED STATE HISTORICAL SITE 726)

2:30 p.m.

Sunday, November 10, 1968

Death Valley, California

TROMBONE PRELUDE . . . . . ELMER D. MILLER

WELCOME . . . . . EDWARD P. JONES
President Death Valley '49ers

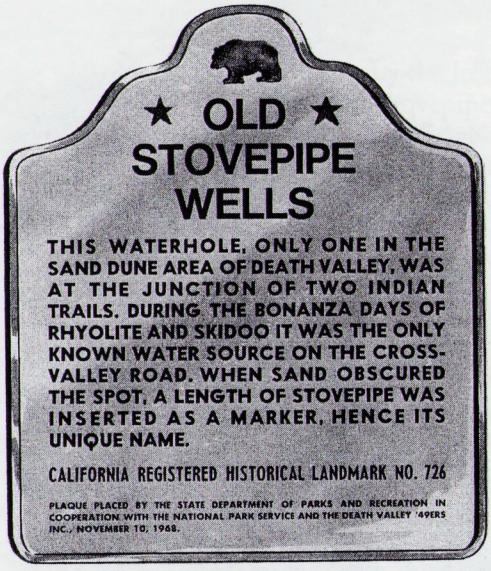
PRESENTATION OF
CO-CHAIRMEN . . . . . DONALD C. MEADOWS
and L. BURR BELDEN

GUITAR SOLO,
"MEN ARE DUST" . . . . J. E. "AIM" MORHARDT

GREETINGS . . . . . ROBERT MURPHY
Superintendent Death Valley
National Monument

GREETINGS . . . . . JACK HOPKINS
Chairman Inyo County
Board of Supervisors

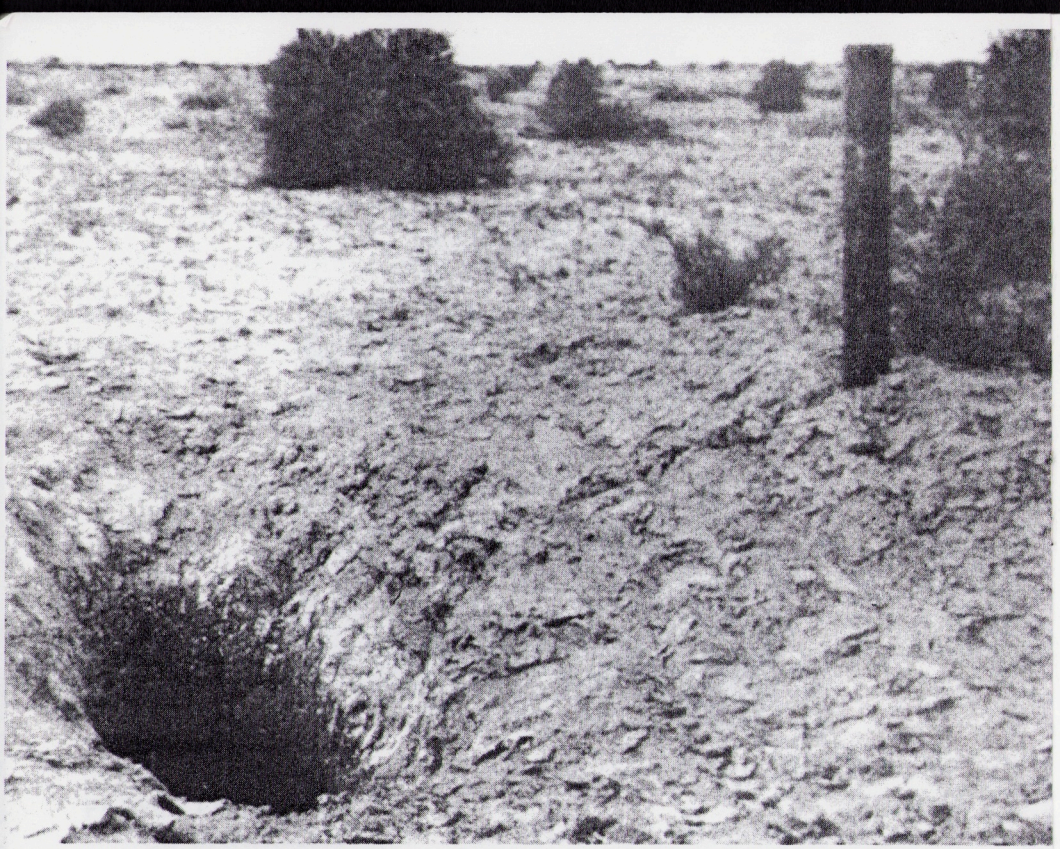
GREETINGS . . . . . DANIEL D. MIKESELL
Chairman San Bernardino County
Board of Supervisors


★ OLD ★
STOVEPIPE
WELLS
THIS WATERHOLE, ONLY ONE IN THE SAND DUNE AREA OF DEATH VALLEY, WAS AT THE JUNCTION OF TWO INDIAN TRAILS. DURING THE BONANZA DAYS OF RHYOLITE AND SKIDOO IT WAS THE ONLY KNOWN WATER SOURCE ON THE CROSS-VALLEY ROAD. WHEN SAND OBSCURED THE SPOT, A LENGTH OF STOVEPIPE WAS INSERTED AS A MARKER, HENCE ITS UNIQUE NAME.
CALIFORNIA REGISTERED HISTORICAL LANDMARK NO. 726
PLAQUE PLACED BY THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN COOPERATION WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND THE DEATH VALLEY '49ERS INC., NOVEMBER 10, 1968.

GUITAR SOLO, "LAST BONANZA" . JOHN W. HILTON

ADDRESS . . . . . MATTHEW RYAN
Superintendent Organ Pipe Cactus
National Monument

MONUMENT UNVEILING . . . DR. HORACE PARKER
Member State Parks and Recreation Commission
and GLENN A. SETTLE
State Historical Advisory Committee



After the tragic 1849 valley crossing by the lost argonauts, whose trails were south and west of Old Stovepipe, the valley swarmed with prospectors hunting the somewhat mythical "Lost Gunsight," a legend built on the flimsy foundation of an improvised front gunsight contrived from a piece of silver float found by a member of the 1849 Mississippi party.

After the "gunsighters" came the "Breyfoglers", a legion intent on finding an outcropping found by one Charles Breyfogle, himself a "gunsighter." Some are known to have camped at Old Stovepipe. Next came the surveyors to plot the arid domain as sections and townships with their stakes. One survey party camped on the alluvial fan northeast from Old Stovepipe, utilized the water, and then went on to dig its own well—Surveyor's well, which is noted on numerous maps.

In 1900 bonanza ore was found at Tonopah. Then came Goldfield, Palmetto, Hornsilver, Roosevelt—all in southern Nevada, and Keane Wonder right on the valley border. From Keane Wonder grew Bullfrog when Ed Cross and Frank "Shorty" Harris scouted hills to the north. A bonanza from the start, the Bullfrog district exploded into Rhyolite, Beatty and suburban camps. "Shorty" went on a prolonged binge when he sold his discovery claim. Cross invested his half in real estate. At Beatty young Ray Gibson opened a store for partners Rose and Palmer. He had been in business but a few weeks when a post office inspector called, naming him postmaster. It seems that "Old Man" Beatty, the postmaster designate could neither read nor write. Such was the fabric of the boom camps on Death Valley's border.

From Bullfrog "Shorty" drifted down to Furnace Creek, picked up Pete Aguerberry and headed for Ballarat to arrive for the annual Fourth of July blowout. On what is now Harrisburg Flats Pete picked up promising ore, called "Shorty" back, and hastily staked out claims, then reluctantly followed his thirsty companion on to Ballarat with its whiskey and women.

Up at Rhyolite Harry Ramsay and "One Eye" Thompson decided to join the Harrisburg rush. They took the trail west

from Furnace Creek and up the Panamints. At the top they hit a fog so thick landmarks were blotted out. Prudently they bedded down for the night. On rousing in the morning they found richly veined rocks within arm's reach of their blanket. They stayed. Others came. A big mill was erected. Water was brought in a pipeline 23 miles from Telescope Peak. That 23-mile pipe gave the camp its name—Skidoo—after the slang phrase "23-skidoo."

Skidoo boomed. Stores and bank were opened along with a lumber yard and several saloons.

The little oasis down by the dunes became a mecca for cross-valley travelers. It was the only waterhole on a long hot trip. Tragically, it was sometimes hard to find. Sand storms obscured it at times. Two nearby graves bear witness to the fact death waited for the unlucky. Along came a passing freighter who hit upon a brilliant idea. He unloaded two lengths of stovepipe and stuck them upright in the water hole. The novel marker could be seen more than a mile away. Soon the little oasis became universally known as Stovepipe Wells.

In 1907 civilization arrived at Old Stovepipe. The waterhole had become a campground on the heavily traveled cross valley road. One wayfarer sensed business opportunity and excavated an 18x12 cellar, then above ground, built mud walls on three sides bonding the mud with empty beer bottles. For a roof he used a tarp laid on timbers and topped with several inches of earth. Such was the approved desert "submarine" construction of the period. The dugout served as a combination grocery and beer garden. The grocery stock consisted of dry beans, oatmeal, bacon and canned tomatoes. Beer came from the Tonopah brewery and was kept "cold" in a tub covered with wet burlap. Now "cold" is a relative term, but when the thermometer hovered in the 120s the beer at Old Stovepipe did taste "cold."

It was so comfortable in the dugout that travelers often asked to sleep inside. That gave the proprietor an idea. He

installed beds and rented them. There was room for but two—a two-bed hotel none the less.

Business boomed, so much so that competition arrived in the form of a tent store pitched a ways to the west. Then the Rhyolite boom faded. The dugout stock was moved out. The tent store stayed but when no one called in three weeks, the stir-crazed owner was happy to be rescued by George Cook of Lone Pine, who happened past hauling lumber.

Old Stovepipe served largely as a waterhole for burros and sheep for the next 15 years. In 1926, H. W. "Bob" Eichbaum built his celebrated toll road from Darwin Wash over Towne Pass and down into the valley. His franchise with Inyo County specified Stovepipe Wells as the eastern end, and so he graded and dragged to the waterhole.

Eichbaum, an electrical engineer who had been associated with the Wrigleys on Catalina, believed Death Valley would be a good winter resort. He studied the tent houses at the Island Villa on Catalina, had frames made for several and loaded up a truck caravan bound for Stovepipe Wells. Six miles short of his goal the heavy trucks became hopelessly mired in the sand. Trucks were unloaded and houses erected on the spot, the location of today's Stove Pipe Wells Village.

For a time Eichbaum called his little resort "Bungalow City" but it was soon changed to "Stovepipe Resort." In early years the toll gate was over the road between the resort's lobby and dining room buildings.

In 1933 President Hoover proclaimed Death Valley a national monument and things changed. The toll road, realigned, became a State highway. Boys in the CCC camp at Park Village built a masonry curb at Stovepipe Wells and installed a pump. The little Eichbaum resort changed hands and expanded. In 1948 a drilled well reached water at the resort. In 1949, during a centennial celebration, 65,000 persons came to the valley on a single weekend. The next year the

Death Valley '49ers staged the first of its annual Encampments which have interpreted Death Valley and its fabulous past to countless thousands.

Today, at Old Stovepipe we dedicate a State tablet of bronze to preserve for all tomorrows the story of this unique spot with its lifesaving water which served well both Indian and miner in decades past.

DEATH VALLEY '49ER KEEPSAKE PUBLICATIONS

1. THE WADE STORY, 1957
   By L. Burr Belden
2. DEATH VALLEY, ITS MUSEUM AND VISITOR CENTER, 1960
   By Horace M. Albright
3. FREEMAN JUNCTION, 1961
   By Ardis M. Walker
4. SEARLES LAKE BORAX, 1962
   By L. Burr Belden and Ardis M. Walker
5. OLD HARMONY BORAX, 1962
   By Nicholas Kockler
6. BALLARAT, 1963
   By Paul Hubbard
7. RALPH PALMER MERRITT (IN MEMORIA) 1964
   By Ardis M. Walker
8. OLD STOVEPIPE WELLS, 1968
   By L. Burr Belden

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